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Palm Sunday: Humility and success

Andrew Kitcatt | Luke 19v28-48 The Triumphal entry

A very good morning to you everyone. I'm glad to see you sporting your Palm Sunday crosses. I have mine, and just to prove to you that I am still a child at heart, I will show you how on the one hand when I hold it upright, I am reverently reminded of what Our Lord and Saviour came to do for each and every one of us in this room. The magnificent sacrifice he gave for me, for all of us. But with a flick of a wrist, I have a sword! And suddenly I am a king fighting the forces of evil, in defence of the good and the right and the true, and to protect all my subjects.

And today, Palm Sunday, is the perfect day to think about kings and queens. We like it when monarchs are fair, just, right in their cause, and have the interests of their subjects at heart. I'm sure many of you remember when Elizabeth passed away: people flooding to see her lying in state. The flowers, the flags, the commemorations that went online. We admire leaders who stand for what we consider right, true, and just. Who stay the course and uphold grand ideals.

That is what many of us think success looks like. But nowadays, I think our leaders think that what a successful leader is, is someone who can demonstrate a great deal of power. How big they can flex their muscles. And, I would guess, how popular they can be. As long as you're popular, then you're alright.

I think this may be a very timely sermon with everything going on the world. And (spoiler alert) Jesus shows us another way. As we look at Palm Sunday, I really want to make one big point today, and that's this.

Jesus *will* return. His kingdom *will* come. And a successful person is not the richest person in the world; the most physically strong; not the most powerful leader; the most popular; Rather, it's someone who can call themselves a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want us to see that if we get that on a personal level, we will have, and know, a freedom unlike any other.

And I appreciate that that can sound a bit contradictory can't it. The idea of someone being both a servant *and* free. But it's true. A life following Jesus, there is no freedom like it.

So that's our trajectory. We're going to remind ourselves, that King Jesus is coming back, to reign as king in his Kingdom. And if we want to know what true success is, let's humble ourselves before him.

Okay, so let's make a start: Jesus is coming back. And we know this *because* of this story.

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So, what's going on in the story? In short: Jesus approaches Jerusalem, there are crowds that look to crown him king, and Jesus doesn't let them. Instead, he weeps over Jerusalem and then clears out the Temple.

So why do the crowds look to crown him king? They are evidently fully expecting him to be crowned king – where has that all come from?

Israel had had promise after promise of a king who would rule over them. Let's go back to 1 Chronicles 17:11-14, where God is making a promise to King David

*¹¹ When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹² He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne **forever**. ¹³ I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. ¹⁴ I will set him over my house and my kingdom **forever**; his throne will be established **forever**."*
1 Chronicles 17:11-14

Now David did have a son: Solomon. And God did establish his kingdom. The temple, God's house, was built under his reign. The Lord loved him as a son and did not remove his love from him; even when he punished Solomon's idolatry by tearing the kingdom away from him and his line, he left him to rule

part of it, and to continue to have his seat in Jerusalem. So, you see how God's promise was immediately fulfilled by Solomon.

But there's a problem... . You may have noticed a particular word that was repeated a couple of times. It appeared 3 times. And that word is "forever". But Solomon died. Solomon didn't stand in the Lord's house and in his kingdom for ever, as God promised David. And not only did he die, but his descendants were exiled to Babylon, and there were no more kings in Israel. Solomon's reign could only have ever been an imperfect fulfilment of God's promise to David.

So we are left with two options – either,

A) God lied to David.

OR

B) a better, perfect fulfilment is yet to come.

And it's precisely this better, perfect fulfilment that the Jews inside Jerusalem are hoping for. So that's why they had an *expectation* of a king who would come and rescue them.

And then along comes Jesus. He's a descendant of David. Remember back when Jesus was baptised – where God publicly acknowledged him as his Son whom he loves.

²² *and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*
Luke 3:22

And he's been going around telling everybody that the kingdom of God has come near.

¹⁵ *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"*
Mark 1:15

He's starting to look like a serious candidate for the perfect fulfilment of God's promise to King David. And if *that* wasn't enough, let's look back to our Old Testament reading from earlier, where we saw that 500 years before, a Jewish prophet, Zechariah, pretty much predicted a moment just like this (*slide, Zechariah 9:9-10*). A king, riding on a donkey, to remove Israel's enemies from her.

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.
Zechariah 9:9-10

Not only this, but Zechariah would go on to write this in Chapter 14. Before I read that just to add context, God has just gathered all of Israel's enemies who besiege Jerusalem in an attempt to destroy it.

³ Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.
Zechariah 14:3-4

And this section concludes:

*¹¹ It (*Jerusalem) will be inhabited; never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure.*
Zechariah 14:11

So, what does the Lord do for an oppressed Jerusalem? He fights for Israel. Where does the Lord start? The Mount of Olives.

And here's Jesus, approaching a Jerusalem which is under occupation by the Romans...from the Mount of Olives...on a donkey. Luke doesn't have this bit, but we get from Mark and Matthew that He's a descendent from David's line, who has the love of God set on him. So right now, he looks like a *serious* candidate for the perfect fulfilment of God's promises. And so, if we're being honest, I don't know about you, but I can hardly blame the crowds for thinking "ah NOW is the time! Our king will reign in peace and justice forever!"

So, we should not be surprised at how the crowds respond here. Now hopefully it's no spoiler to say that this didn't end up happening. One big clue first clue is what happened next in the story. We're told in verses 41-44 that Jesus wept for Jerusalem. The only other time we hear of him weeping was for Lazarus in John's gospel, when Lazarus died. So, the fact he is doing so now is a *really* big deal. He weeps because the people there, despite looking to crown him king, have missed something. Instead, he prophesies something different – a dark day for Jerusalem.

And the eagle-eyed among you will observe, even if you just look outside, you'll notice that there isn't a king Jesus, reigning from Jerusalem. There isn't any king in Jerusalem. Instead, Jesus ended up crucified on a cross. Instead of taking a crown of splendour, he had a crown of thorns placed on his head. "Beaten, mocked and scorned", so the modern hymn goes. I wonder if people nowadays would describe that as successful. To have the backing to be crowned king, but to end up dying via a method of Roman execution that was typically reserved for criminals.

But if you're a Christian, you also know the rest of the story – yes, he died, but on the third day, he rose again. And then, he ascended into heaven. This is in the Creed we say pretty much every week here. And for just a bit of extra icing on the cake, we get at the beginning of Acts (written by Luke, I might add)

"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Acts 1:11

This is two men in white robes telling the disciples that Jesus *will* come back. And he *will* bring his Kingdom. And *then* everything the crowds in Jerusalem on the day of his triumphal entry, shall come to pass. But just not yet. Until that day when he comes again and restores his kingdom, there's work to do. And we're actually told what this work is. The apostle Paul wrote that we are waiting "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in." (Romans 11:25). In other words, God has given us followers of Jesus the job of preaching the gospel and bring as many people into the faith as possible before he returns. And remember, he *will* return, and reign as king over the *whole* earth. And as Christians, we are servants to that king.

And in response, we Christians have a choice – we can either be people who go along with that, who preach the good news that we have. Or we can choose not to. I think it's interesting that unlike the other gospels, Luke focusses on what the Pharisees are doing. In verse 39, they're telling Jesus to get his disciples to stop encouraging the crowds. And actually, to be fair, there is some degree of logic to this. They've spent a *lot* of time cultivating peace with the ruling authorities. If you remember Tom's *Deeper Theology* talk on the Kingdom of God, we got a list of all the powers that Israel had been in the middle of. From the Persians you had Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, the Hasmoneans before finally we meet the Romans in Jesus' day. So, to finally have a relatively peaceful settlement was something incredibly precious, even *if* it was under an empire.

But we're not told here that Jesus' problem with the Pharisees was that they were trying to keep the peace. He knew full well that he was not going to be crowned king that day. Instead, he has another problem with them. What did they *do* with that peace? With the success from their achievement, the religious leaders saw fit to turn the Temple into a place where money is made. A place filled with, probably, *successful* businesses. You might say "good for them, embracing the spirit of an entrepreneurial work ethic. Who's to stand in the way of their freedom to do that?" Jesus had other ideas. The sellers were thieves. They'd taken something incredibly precious, the place where the presence of God lived, and turned it into a place to satisfy their own desires and cravings. When in reality, they should have been at their most reverent before the Lord, as his servants. But instead, they were servants of their own desires.

And now we come to the final point about being servants for Christ, and how that is truly what a successful life looks like. We heard earlier in our Practicing the Way series that everyone, all the time, is being influenced or moulded by something or maybe someone. That fact alone is not necessarily a bad thing, it's just a fact of being a human. It's what we allow ourselves to be influenced by that counts. And what we allow ourselves to be influenced by is what we will end up serving. This could be a desire, an influential person and their habits, even something as simple as a hobby. You may have heard it put this way: whatever your thoughts turn to when you are completely alone, *that* is your god. And to be a servant of any god that isn't the Lord, is a waste of time. If it's our desires, power, influence, popularity, a flourishing sex life, wealth, high achieving children, respect from our peers, a high paying job, – all of that will fade, they don't last forever. Barely a breath in the life of the universe. And I don't know about you, but to claw and chase after those things that won't last doesn't sound like success to me. We need something that lasts, and that something, if the Bible is true, is Jesus. When we put him first, serve him first, humble ourselves before him, that is where success lies.

It's important to recognise what comes first in our lives. And if it's not God, what would Jesus do? Jesus clears out the Temple. He cleanses the house of the Lord. And I think some of you may be seeing where I'm going with this. If we are to humble ourselves, and be Christ's servants, all of us need to be examining ourselves regularly, and chucking out anything that comes before the Lord in our lives. Colossians 3:5 puts it this way: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...". That's strong language, isn't it? No tolerance. Cast it out, as Jesus did the sellers in the Temple. And so when Jesus returns, we can stand before him as successful servants.

Now I *really* want to urge caution here. Whilst I say we need to be examining ourselves and clearing our hearts of all our worldly desires, it's *so* important that we are kind to ourselves. To be as forgiving to ourselves as Jesus has been to us. As Jesus has forgiven us, we can forgive ourselves too. The words of Romans 2:4 ring so true here: "That God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" Do you know how kind he is? The Lord Jesus we serve is SO kind. When we are bruised, he will not break us. Let *that* be what draws us close to him, not out of self-pity.

And compare that with the things the world chases after: are they kind? Our desires, power, influence, popularity, wealth: do they love you? Can you go to them when the chips are down? No, they don't care. Can you go to them for love? No, you have to work for them. Whereas Jesus loves you *unconditionally*. It's put this way in Romans 5:8.

*⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8*

As Tom Peryer put it last week in his sermon on sin, we're all ungodly...and Christ died for us. Therefore, he loves us. None of us asked him to do that. It was his good will and pleasure. Whether you are a Christian or not, I want you to *know* the *freedom* of never having to serve those things which don't last. But serve the Lord Jesus Christ, who is kind. Turn to him, let go of the things that have a hold on you, and lay them before Christ.

So what do we do with this freedom? Earlier I mentioned that before Jesus comes back, we have a job to do. And that is to welcome everyone into the kingdom. Preach the good news: "Jesus will return and wants you to be part of that." And to tie this all together, let's read what Paul says.

*¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.
1 Corinthians 9:19*

Instead of using this freedom to serve ourselves, let us in this "space of grace" before Jesus' return in majesty and splendour, use this freedom God has given us to serve others, that we might bless each other as God's family, and win others for Christ. And when the day comes when he returns, we can enjoy him saying to us "well done, good and faithful servant." So, this Palm Sunday, remember, Jesus *will* return. He *will* bring his kingdom, and reign forever. And a successful life is one where we humble ourselves, clear out all the things in ourselves that distract us from serving King Jesus. Preach the good news, put others before ourselves. And I pray we take courage, look forward to the day where we can stand with Jesus, and enjoy being in his presence fully.